

Interview With Alhurra Television May 5, 2004

Abuse of Iraqi Prisoners at Abu Ghraib Prison

Q. Mr. President, thank you for agreeing to do this interview with us.

Evidence of torture of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. personnel has left many Iraqis and people in the Middle East and the Arab world with the impression that the United States is no better than Saddam Hussein regime. Especially when this alleged torture took place in the Abu Ghraib prison, a symbol of torture of—

The President. Yes.

Q. What can the U.S. do, or what can you do to get out of this?

The President. First, people in Iraq must understand that I view those practices as abhorrent. They must also understand that what took place in that prison does not represent America that I know. The America I know is a compassionate country that believes in freedom. The America I know cares about every individual. The America I know has sent troops into Iraq to promote freedom—good, honorable citizens that are helping the Iraqis every day.

It's also important for the people of Iraq to know that in a democracy, everything is not perfect, that mistakes are made. But in a democracy as well those mistakes will be investigated, and people will be brought to justice. We're an open society. We're a society that is willing to investigate, fully investigate in this case, what took place in that prison.

That stands in stark contrast to life under Saddam Hussein. His trained torturers were never brought to justice under his regime. There were no investigations about mistreatment of people. There will be investigations. People will be brought to justice.

Media Coverage/Investigations

Q. When did you learn about the—did you see the pictures on TV? When was the first time you heard about—

The President. Yes, the first time I saw or heard about pictures was on TV. However, as you might remember, in early January, General Kimmitt talked about an investigation that would be taking place about accused—alleged improprieties in the prison. So our Government has been in the process of investigating.

And there are two—more than two investigations, multiple investigations going on, some of them related to any criminal charges that may be filed. And in our system of law, it's essential that those criminal charges go forward without prejudice. In other words, people need to be—are treated innocent until proven guilty. And facts are now being gathered.

And secondly, there is investigations to determine how widespread abuse may be occurring, and we want to know the truth. I talked to the Secretary of Defense this morning, by the way. I said, "Find the truth, and then tell the Iraqi people and the world the truth." We have nothing to hide. We believe in transparency, because we're a free society. That's what free societies do. They—if there's a problem, they address those problems in a forthright, up-front manner. And that's what's taking place.

Accountability

Q. Mr. President, in a democracy and a free society, as you mentioned, people investigate, but at the same time, even those who are not directly responsible for these events take responsibility. With such a problem of this magnitude, do we expect anyone to step down? Do you still have confidence in the Secretary of Defense?

The President. Oh, of course I've got confidence in the Secretary of Defense, and I've got confidence in the commanders on the ground in Iraq, because they and our troops are doing great work on behalf of the Iraqi people. We're finding the few that wanted to try to stop progress toward freedom and democracy. We're helping the Iraqi people stand up a government. We stand side by side with the Iraqis that love freedom.

And—but people will be held to account. That's what the process does. That's what we do in America. We fully investigate. We let everybody see the results of the investigation, and then people will be held to account.

Human Rights Abuses/International Red Cross

Q. If your State Department issues a human rights report about practices around the world and abuses, and we call upon countries every once in a while to—

The President. Right.

Q. —try to put pressure on them to allow International Red Cross to visit prisons and detention center, would you allow the International Red Cross and other human rights organization to visit prisons under the control of the U.S. military?

The President. Of course we'll cooperate with the International Red Cross. They're a vital organization, and we work with the International Red Cross. And you're right, we do point out human rights abuses. We also say to those governments, "Clean up your act," and that's precisely what America is doing.

We've discovered these abuses. They're abhorrent abuses. They do not reflect—the actions of these few people do not reflect the hearts of the American people. The American people are just as appalled at what they have seen on TV as the Iraqi citizens have. The Iraqi citizens must understand that. And therefore, there will be a full investigation, and justice will be

served. And we will do to ourselves what we expect of others.

And when we say, "You've got human rights abuses, take care of the problem," we will do the same thing. We're taking care of the problem. And it's—it is unpleasant for Americans to see that some citizens, some soldiers have acted this way, because it does—again, I keep repeating, but it's true—it doesn't reflect how we think. This is not America. America is a country of justice and law and freedom and treating people with respect.

Cooperation Within Iraq

Q. Transferring control of Fallujah in Iraq to former army officers under Saddam Hussein led many people in Iraq and even in the Arab world to believe that the U.S. is lowering its expectation.

The President. Yes.

Q. How would you respond?

The President. Quite the contrary. We're raising expectations. We believe the Iraqi people can self-govern, and we believe the Iraqi people have got the capacity to take care of people who are willing to terrorize innocent Iraqi citizens. And that's what you're seeing in Fallujah. As a matter of fact, the general in charge of the operation in Fallujah had been imprisoned by Saddam Hussein. So he felt the vindictiveness of the Hussein regime.

And I've got confidence that Iraq will be a peaceful, self-governing nation. And I also have confidence that, with help, the Iraqi security forces will be strong against foreign terrorists and others who are willing to kill and criminals who are willing to try to wreak havoc in this society. Listen, there are thousands of Iraqi—innocent Iraqis who are dying at the hands of these killers. And we want to help decent, honorable Iraqi citizens bring peace and security to Iraq.

Q. So there is no reversal in policy of de-Ba'athification?

The President. Oh, no. There are citizens, for example, in the—amongst the

teacher ranks in Sunni—parts of Sunni Iraq that were denied the right to teach because they may have been affiliated with the Ba'athist Party in the past but who are very important to the future of Iraq because they're teachers. And of course, they are now being let back in the classroom, not to spread political propaganda but to teach, to teach children.

And obviously, there is a process of balancing those who may have been affiliated with the Ba'ath Party and those who are terrorists and killers. And obviously, terrorists and killers and extremists will not be a part of the Government, but people who are by and large peaceful people, who care deeply about the future of Iraq, will be. And that's what you're seeing taking place now.

Progress in Iraq/Transfer of Sovereignty

Q. It's been over a year since Saddam Hussein's regime has toppled down, and U.S. allies are in place right now in Iraq. What is your assessment, today, of U.S. allies and the Governing Council and the various factions of the Iraqi Government?

The President. Yes, well, first, I think we've made a lot of progress in a year.

Q. Do you still trust them? Do you still—

The President. Well, I trust the Iraqi people, let me put it to you that way. I believe the Iraqi people want to be free. By far, the vast majority of Iraqi citizens want to have a life that is peaceful, so they can raise their children, see that their children are educated, have a chance for their children to succeed. The businesspeople of Iraq just want a stable environment for them to be able to run their businesses and make a living. People want jobs. I mean, there are normal aspirations in Iraq that give me great confidence in the future of Iraq. People aspire for the same thing in Iraq as we do in America, a chance to succeed.

I also have confidence that the process we're under will work, which is to transfer

sovereignty on June 30th. The people of Iraq must understand, sovereignty will be transferred on June 30th. And there's a process now in place to make sure that there's an entity to which we transfer sovereignty. And then there will be elections. And I think the timetable we're on is a realistic timetable. It's one that will be met, and I believe that the elections will help the Iraqi citizens realize that freedom is coming.

Israeli Disengagement Plan

Q. If I may ask you my final question on the issue of the peace efforts that you are conducting, you supported Prime Minister Sharon's plan to withdraw from Gaza, and you sent senior officials to Israel, and Israeli officials came to Washington and negotiated that plan. Do you think it was a mistake to support a plan before the Prime Minister secured the support of his own party?

The President. I think when you see a step toward peace, it's important for a peaceful nation like America to embrace it. And I felt that a withdrawal from the Gaza by the Israeli Prime Minister as well as the withdrawal from four settlements from the West Bank by the Israeli Prime Minister was a step toward peace. And at the time he did so, I called for the United States and others to seize this moment—the Quartet and the European Union and Russia and the United Nations and, hopefully, the World Bank, to seize this moment and to help the development of a Palestinian state that will be at peace with its neighbors, a Palestinian state that will provide hope for long-suffering Palestinian people.

I think this is an historic moment for the world. I think this is a good opportunity to step forth. I am confident that a peaceful Palestinian state can emerge. I'm the first President ever to call for the establishment of a Palestinian state. I still feel strongly that there should be one. I also recognize that we have got a duty, all of us, to fight

off the terrorists who are trying to stop the spread of a peaceful Palestinian state or the creation of a Palestinian state.

And now is the time to make progress, and I believe we can. There was a good statement yesterday out of the Quartet that confirmed our desire for a Palestinian state to emerge. And it's—what the Prime Minister of Israel did was—took a political risk; obviously he did. I mean, his own party condemned the statement—condemned the policy. However, I still believe it was the right thing for him to do, and we support peace in the Middle East. And we support

the vision of two states living side by side in peace.

Q. Thank you very much, Mr. President.
The President. Good job.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 10:18 a.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Brig. Gen. Mark T. Kimmitt, USA, deputy director of operations, Coalition Joint Task Force Seven; Iraqi General Mohammed Latif; and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel.

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Q. Mr. President, thank you for giving us this chance here in Al Arabiya. Regarding the alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoners, six U.S. soldiers are being reprimanded. Do you think that's enough?

The President. First, I want to tell the people of the Middle East that the practices that took place in that prison are abhorrent, and they don't represent America; they represent the actions of a few people. Secondly, it's important for people to understand that in a democracy that there will be a full investigation. In other words, we want to know the truth.

In our country, when there's an allegation of abuse—more than an allegation in this case, actual abuse, we saw the pictures—there will be a full investigation, and justice will be delivered. We have a presumption of innocent until you're guilty in our system, but the system will be transparent. It will be open, and people will see the results.

This is a serious matter. It's a matter that reflects badly on my country. Our citizens in America are appalled by what they

saw, just like people in the Middle East are appalled. We share the same deep concerns, and we will find the truth. We will fully investigate. The world will see the investigation, and justice will be served.

Middle East Reaction

Q. And you just—you've said this is reflected badly here, in United States of America. How do you think this will be perceived in the Middle East?

The President. Terrible. I think people in the Middle East who want to dislike America will use this as an excuse to remind people about their dislike. I think the average citizen will say, "This isn't the country that I've been told about." We're a great country because we're a free country, and we do not tolerate these kind of abuses.

The people of the Middle East must be assured that we will investigate fully, that we will find out the truth. They will know the truth, just like the American citizens will know the truth, and justice will be served.

Secondly, it's very important for the people of the Middle East to realize that the